

# Exodus 27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Exodus chapter 27. You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits broad. The altar shall be square and its height shall be three cubits, and you shall make horns for it on its four corners. Its horn shall be of one piece with it, and you shall overlay it with bronze. You shall make pots for it to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins and forks and fire pans. You shall make all its utensils of bronze. You shall also make for it a grating, a network of bronze, and on the net you shall make four bronze rings at its four corners. And you shall set it under the ledge of the altar, so that the net extends halfway down the altar. And you shall make poles for the altar, poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with bronze. And the poles shall be put through the rings, so that the poles are on the two sides of the altar when it is carried.

You shall make it hollow, with boards. As it has been shown you on the mountain, so shall it be made. You shall make the court of the tabernacle. On the south side the court shall have hangings of fine twined linen, a hundred cubits long for one side. Its twenty pillars and their twenty bases shall be of bronze. But the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver. And likewise for its length on the north side there shall be hangings a hundred cubits long, its pillars twenty and their bases twenty of bronze. But the hooks of the pillars and their fillets shall be of silver.

And for the breadth of the court on the west side there shall be hangings for fifty cubits, with ten pillars and ten bases. The breadth of the court on the front shall be fifty cubits, the hangings for the one side of the gate shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. On the other side the hangings shall be fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases. For the gate of the court there shall be a screen, twenty cubits long, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, embroidered with needlework. It shall have four pillars, and with them four bases. All the pillars around the court shall be filleted with silver.

Their hooks shall be of silver, and their bases of bronze. The length of the court shall be a hundred cubits, the breadth fifty, and the height five cubits, with hangings of fine twined linen and bases of bronze. All the utensils of the tabernacle for every use, and all its pegs and all the pegs of the court shall be of bronze. You shall command the people of Israel that they bring to you pure beaten olive oil for the light, that a lamp may regularly be set to burn. In the tent of meeting outside the veil that is before the testimony, Aaron and his son shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. It shall be a statute forever to be observed throughout their generations by the people of Israel. In Exodus chapter 27 we find the instructions for the construction of the altar, the courtyard, and the instructions to tend the lamps and to provide oil for them. The tabernacle, as we've remarked before, is the institutionalisation of the encounter at Sinai. It's also a replay of the pattern of creation. The most focal point of Israel's religious practice was the altar. This was the outer altar. It's the altar of bronze in contrast to the golden incense altar that would be within the holy place.

Altars were always an essential element of worship. Within the patriarchal period we see several altars being constructed. And this particular altar would have been a square of around seven and a half feet or just under two and a half metres, and around four and a half feet or 1.35 metres tall. It was moved around by bronze poles inserted in the sides, and when they set it up they presumably set it up by filling the hollow wooden altar with earth and stones, which among other things would have protected the structure from the fire upon it. The altar was likely placed on an elevation, although probably not a stepped one, as we see in chapter 20 that's restricted. It was reminiscent of Sinai itself.

[ 4 : 21 ] Of course this invites us to think of Sinai itself as an altar. The association works in both directions. In chapter 19 verse 18, the smoke from Sinai ascends like that of a kiln. So Mount Sinai is like an altar, and then the altar is like Mount Sinai. It's important to consider how symbolic structures work, and how analogical reasoning works more generally. A lot of the logic of the tabernacle is based upon associations between things on different levels. So there's an association between the tabernacle and heaven itself. There's an association between the tabernacle and Eden. There's an association between the tabernacle and Mount Sinai, and all of those different associations are in play.

And the symbolic movements that occur relative to the tabernacle are all ways of negotiating those symbolic spaces too. So it's a re-entry into Eden. It's an entry into heaven itself in some sense.

It's an ascent of Mount Sinai. And thinking about it in this way will help us to understand a lot of the logic that underlies the sacrificial system. Things ascending to God from the altar then, among other things, related to things ascending Sinai. It was also a means by which access to the tabernacle itself occurred. And so ascend Mount Sinai, and then you enter into God's presence.

Animals were not killed on the altar, but they would be killed near the altar and then offered upon the altar. It's worth remembering this fact because often we overemphasize the importance of killing as the element of sacrifice. We think that that is the element that really makes sacrifice work. It's the real logic behind it. But it isn't really. The most important thing tends to be elsewhere. It's the presentation of the blood, or it's the consumption of that up in fire. Whatever it is, it's not narrowly focused upon the actual act of killing.

The horns of the altar are also given particular importance here. One could go to the horns of the altar, as we see elsewhere, for refuge, among other things. We see that in the story of Joab, as an example. The horns of the altar also had a part to play in certain ceremonies, as blood would be placed upon them. And they obviously had symbolic importance for that reason.

[ 6 : 42 ] We should also notice that the altar is bronze. We've seen already the movement from gold to silver to bronze, that there is a symbolic movement from the most glorious to the slightly less glorious to the lesser glory still. And here I think we're seeing that again. There's a decrease in the level of glory. It's an access to God. It's not necessarily the most holy place where things are in gold.

We should also remember that there was another altar, the incense altar, which was of gold, and that was in the holy place. But maybe we should see an analogy between this altar and that altar on some level. The courtyard marks out sacred from profane space. It also represents the more general realm of the Israelites before the Mount of Sinai. It's 100 cubits by 50 cubits. And perhaps some connection with the ark should be considered, which was 300 cubits by 50 cubits. It's maybe a tabernacalization of the area of the courtyard. So the tabernacle is 30 by 10 dimension. And now you have the fusion of those two things, the courtyard and the tabernacle brought together. Maybe that's part of what's going on. It's surrounded by linen hangings, and perhaps these represent clouds.

The positioning is something that a number of people have speculated about. And it seems quite likely that the Ark of the Covenant and the altar were at the diagonals of the two squares of the courtyard. So if you split the rectangle of the courtyard into two squares of equal size, and you drew diagonals for both of those squares, in the one, the centre thing would be the Ark of the Covenant, and in the other, it would be the altar, which again suggests some connection between those two things. The third day of creation involved the separation of the land from the sea. And the third day in the formation of the tabernacle involves the establishment of the brazen altar, which presumably would have turned to green over time, maybe related to the grass of the third day of creation, the second part of that day. And the tabernacle court was that division of land from the sea of the general wilderness or the Gentiles. This was a sort of space in which Israel was brought up from the sea of the more general nations and brought into God's presence in some sort of land.

The establishment of the court then divides the land beyond it from the land within, which is a sacred space rather than profane space. It's setting out, as it were, the boundaries of the sea so that it could not pass. The final thing we have in this chapter is oil set up for lighting. The lamp in the tabernacle needs to be kept burning, and oil is important for this. Both morning and evening, Aaron and his sons had to tend to this task. And that tending to the light maybe represents something of the more general task of the priests and the Levites, in keeping the light of God's word burning in Israel, the light of God's presence. And that light seems to have symbolic importance in places like 1 Samuel.

In 1 Samuel chapter 3 verses 1 to 3, Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord in the presence of Eli, and the word of the Lord was rare in those days. There was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. The lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out.

[10:20] Now there are three things there. There's the light of the word of the Lord, as God's word is heard in the voice of prophecy and in the voice of scripture. There's the eyes of the high priest, his vision, his insight, his wisdom, and then there's the lamp of the Lord. And that threefold connection, I think, is brought out in a literary level in 1 Samuel chapter 3. I think here it's represented by the task of the Levites and the priests to tend to that. This can, of course, be connected to the order of creation.

The fourth day involved oil for the lampstand, which corresponds to the great lights created on the fourth day of the original creation. So you have the original light created on the first day, and then you have the light that's corresponding to that placed in the heavens on the fourth day. Now here, I think, we can also see a shift from a forming stage, where everything needs to be made according to the pattern, that's the phrase that recurs throughout the forming phase, to a new phrase throughout their generations.

So this emphasis upon succession and delegation and filling. And there, I think, we've seen that movement, and this occurs on the fourth day of this new creation. A question to consider.

If you think about the process of moving from the entrance of the tabernacle courtyard, past the altar, and into the holy place, what might the visual effect of that movement have impressed upon you about what it means to come near to God?